

'Reflect'. Is This a Reasonable Request?

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Key words

Reflect; Reflection; Reflective Practice; Early Childhood; Undergraduate; Students; Focus Groups; Coperative Inquiry

Project Aim

The aim of this project has been to gain understanding of level 4 (first year) undergraduate Early Childhood students' perceptions of reflection and reflective practice. The intention behind this was to enable the Early Childhood tutor team to support the development of reflective dispositions within our students. Tutors had recognised from previous cohorts that written reflective accounts were predominantly based upon recollections of experiences. These formed the basis of descriptive accounts demonstrating an ability to recall events but not use the experience to question and make sense of what had happened. This displayed what Knight (1996) and Brookfield (1995) describe as a superficial and tokenistic approach to reflective practice and was devoid of any critical edge.

'Experience alone does not lead to learning; reflecting on experience is essential'
Loughran (2002:35)

Rationale

Having a grounded belief in what we do and what we value is fundamental in gaining credibility as professional practitioners (Brookfield 1995). Having a means by which to justify our actions and beliefs is important as it enables us to feel empowered and valued. If we do not question our practice and beliefs there is a danger of remaining static in our thinking and action. This reflects Brookfield's (1995:265) thoughts

'Not to be reflective is to live in the present as a prisoner of the past. ...not to be critically reflective is to be blown about by the winds of cultural and pedagogic preference'

The social constructivist pedagogical principles of Early Childhood underpin this method of learning. Children and adults alike construct their understanding of themselves and the world through reflecting, actively constructing concepts by making sense of their experiences (Piaget and Inhelder 1969; Kolb 1984). Deepening our understanding of the social constructivist theory enables us to relate more effectively to the theory of reflective practice (Kinsella 2006). Therefore our pedagogy or what influences our approaches to learning and teaching could well be fundamental to our ability to, and application of reflective practice.

Methodology

My methodology reflects the nature of this research. I wanted to make sense of the *'meanings others have about the world'* (Cresswell 2003:9), specifically students' perceptions of reflection. Having students and colleagues as participants enabled this *'cooperative inquiry'* (Heron and Reason 2000:144) to gain a practical understanding of the focus issues and not just a theoretical perspective.

The main data collecting method used was 'Focus Group Discussion'. Freire (1973) used study circles or focus groups to engage people in dialogue and believed that dialogue *'is essential to human liberation and transformation'* (cited in Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2005:890). One of the advantages of the focus group is that it can encourage participation from students who feel uncomfortable being interviewed individually.

Ethical considerations were made and permission gained from the University of Worcester ethics committee. My exact intentions were explained to all participants. Their voices played a crucial part of this research; quotations from their discussion were used to demonstrate issues and key points raised. Anonymity was assured as far as was possible.

A group of seven students (five level 4 students and two level 5 students) were involved in three focus group discussions between October 08 and May 09. The first discussion was based upon defining what they believed 'reflection' meant. The second discussion was based upon the thoughts of Stephen Brookfield (1995) in his book 'How to become a Critically Reflective Teacher'. Students had been introduced to Brookfield's 'Four Lenses' theory during a mandatory lecture and the focus group participants were asked to read part of his book in preparation for the second focus group discussion. The third and final focus group discussion was based upon how far they felt they had developed their reflective dispositions and understanding of reflection within the research period.

In addition to this, some of my Early Childhood tutor colleagues were involved in two focus group discussions. Both discussions were based upon reviewing samples of participants reflective writing to reveal tutors thoughts and perceptions of the concept of reflection and to look for any evidence that the introduction of a 'framework' for reflection had been and applied.

Key Findings and Making Sense of my Experience

- **Assumptions being made about student's understanding of vocabulary**

During the first student Focus Group it very quickly became apparent that there was much confusion about what 'reflection' was in this context and most students referred to there literal understanding of the word. This revealed that as tutors we do make assumptions about student's understanding of terminology that we use on a daily basis. There are many implicit structures within the Early Childhood programme to encourage reflective development. The introduction of more explicit strategies will dispel fears of some students missing more subtle initiatives.

- **Assumption that all tutors have a common understanding of the concept of Reflection**

Tutor Focus Group discussions and informal discussions with colleagues revealed the necessity to create opportunities to develop a team understanding of the concept of reflection. For instance some colleagues viewed reflection as a higher order thinking skill than evaluation. The use of the word reflection can often be mistaken to mean evaluation. These kinds of issues should be discussed in an open forum so that the Early Childhood team has a common understanding of expectations.

- **The need to recognize the cultural differences between student's previous learning experiences and approaches taken in Early Childhood at HE**

The type of intuitive and instinctive thinking we use when in situations requiring us to act quickly is described by Schon (1983) as 'tacit knowing'. This is a good starting point yet seems quite far removed from the type of focused reflective process we require from our students.

Learning from experiences and understanding the relationship between theoretical perspectives and practice (praxis) requires the ability to reflect upon information to make sense of the situation. Argyris and Schon (1974) recognise the complications for practitioners when 'espoused' theory and values differ from those embedded in practice. Therefore it is essential to provide students with tools to support them developing their own evidence based theories and confident identities as Early Childhood professionals.

The characteristic and aspirations of the learner are most important in the learning process. The response of the learner to new experience is determined significantly by past experiences which have contributed to the ways in which the learner perceives the world

Boud et al (1985:21)

Therefore, the challenge for tutors is to find ways to promote a student centred engagement in the learning process and acknowledge the variation in previous experiences that determine and shape future perceptions. Developing inquiring minds and critical thinking, rather than readily accepting material as 'the truth' requires a transition process. A lot of our students have come from programmes of study where they have been rewarded for accurately recapitulating material as 'the truth' and not required to question or engage in analytical debate. One of the implications for this change is that students, who have been very successful within this approach to learning, may find difficulty adjusting to a system requiring quite different skills and accepting a possible regression in grade profiles. This, in turn, can lead to doubts of self-efficacy and disengagement with the programme of study. These and other cultural influences on our learning dispositions can impact on our ability to adapt.

- **The need to develop student's self awareness and self identity to enable them to use their autobiographical lens to reflect**

Being able to view ourselves and critically review our action and thoughts, threatens changes to our identity. This requires an initial security with our self identity to have the confidence to continually recreate new identities in light of our experiences and reflections. Ghaye and Ghaye (1998:6) view the process of reflection as '*sense making...linked with how we see ourselves*'.

This raises more questions – are we sure that our students have the appropriate infrastructure in place before asking them to reflect. For instance are they self aware? What kind of learning identity do they have? Secondly the need to make ongoing reflection also requires us to update our knowledge of the profession. It is difficult to change our professional identity when we have not had much professional experience. Therefore when students are initially introduced to reflective practice it is their personal / autobiographical 'lenses' (Brookfield 1995) that predominantly influence their reflections.

- **The need to appreciate the process of becoming more efficient at reflecting and reviewing our assessment expectations to account for this**

It is difficult to assess student's ability to use reflection if reflection and reflective practice is not defined and understood by those required to use and review it. There are many definitions of reflection. It is also difficult to assess student's reflective action, as Ixer (1999:520) explains

The physical outcome of an internal thought would be one level, while the rehearsing in one's mind of a possible solution to a problem, filtered through one's previous individual and social experience so as to make sense of it, lies on another level.

- **The need to structure the programme to develop the skills needed to think and write reflectively**

Becoming actively engaged in the learning process and taking responsibility for our own learning experiences requires a cultural mind shift for most undergraduates who have come from a culture of text book learning and, in the words of a personal tutee, being '*spoon fed*' information. I agree with Park (2003:183) who states that

Students who actively engage with what they are studying tend to understand more, learn more, remember more, enjoy it more and be more able to appreciate the relevance of what they have learned, than students who passively receive what we teach them.

Of course this is not a recent discovery, many before have recognised the advantages of '*experiential learning*' (Dewey 1933, Kolb 1984). The Socratic method of questioning to encourage reflective thought is part of the pedagogy continually used with our students. This encourages students to explore their own thoughts and give a personal response to questions. This method also requires nurturing as students are initially rather nervous about revealing personal opinion in fear of getting the response wrong. It also requires tutors to respect and accept student's responses and support them to develop a personalised understanding of their experiences.

Modelling this process of reflective questioning and thinking is important in creating a culture of reflection (Barnett and O'Mahony 2006). Student's voices are valued and their participation in course development encourages them to reflect upon their experiences and become an important part of '*mutual discovery*' alongside tutors. This demonstrates that the reflective process permeates the whole course experience and is not restricted to the content of the field of study. Once gained, a reflective disposition guides all of life's experiences and is not a tool to be used on certain occasions, but forms part of ones character.

Sharing experiences and gathering different perspectives on the issue can provide at least different options and possibly a better informed decision for action. This upholds Sanders (2002:195) claims that that reflection is an '*essential part of learning from work based situations*'. The analysis of experience enables students to develop new understandings for the improvement of future practice.

According to Boud and Walker (1998:191) many educators are failing students in the development of reflection and reflective practice because of the '*instrumental or rule-following*' approaches taken to reflective activities. I agree with their argument for reflection to be '*flexibly deployed*' and also wish to avoid a prescriptive use of a mechanistic approach to reflective practice. However, the dilemma here is enabling students to gain an understanding of the abstract concept of reflection without giving a rigid framework. Russell (2005:199) contradicts the thoughts of Boud and Walker (1998) by emphasising a need for explicit strategies for helping students reflect upon their practice and concludes that '*reflective practice can and should be taught*'.

Conclusion

This has been a significant learning experience for me. Emerging key issues and themes from the focus group discussions have enabled me to review our expectations of students and the programme content to implement strategies to develop reflective dispositions. The effectiveness of the Focus Group forum and philosophy for reflective dialogue has prompted me to adapt the programme's current 'learning group' pedagogy to incorporate this style of discussion within mandatory modules from the beginning of the course. My research continues and my own reflective disposition is strengthened as a result of listening to my students and colleagues.

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